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Community Reading Programs

Although it may not be very noticeable, the number of books being read is slowly declining. Some people may not think reading is important, but many factors of life are affected by people’s literacy, such as SAT’s and regular education. The number of adults reading has gone down 10% between 1982 and 2002 (Azzam). Some studies show that this decline is a result of electronic media used, especially with the younger generations being so technically advanced (Azzam). The main question is: what can be done to turn this trend around? One possible answer may be to encourage and support community reading programs. When asked what exactly a community reading program is, the average person may not know. This is not very surprising because these types of programs have only been around since 1998. Nancy Pearl, the executive director of the Washington Center for the Book at the Seattle Public Library, started the idea of a city-wide reading campaign called a “City Read.” After she started this program, other states and cities such as Buffalo, Rochester, Chicago, and Kentucky followed Pearl’s lead and started their own reading programs (Masterpiece Theatre).

One of the most popular types of reading organizations is called a “One Book” program. Most of these programs are done by public libraries, but school libraries are also able to partake in and even organize these events. A specific example is The Cape Central High School Library, which organized “United We Read”, a month long literacy program held in February in Cape Girardeau, Missouri. Julia Jorgensen, a librarian at Cape Central High created this program based off of a “One Book” project in Chicago. Of the success of her community program, Jorgensen says that she was surprised that the students were so willing to talk about their ideas with strangers. She also said that people of all different ages were able to learn from each other. The different age groups did not affect the reading experience, they actually benefited it. Jorgensen said that when their group read *Tuesdays with Morrie: An Old Man, a Young Man and Life’s Greatest Lesson*, everyone in the group shared the same feelings about the book (Bafile). Another example of a community reading program is “Reading to Rover” at the Statesboro Regional Library. This program encourages literacy in children by allowing them to read to dogs. Although this may seem like a waste of time, the children are able to better their reading abilities because they do not feel pressured around the dogs, as they might in front of other students or teachers (Reading to Rover).

Community reading programs not only promote reading, but they also bring people together while getting them involved with important history. At Saklan Valley School in Moraga, California, the middle school students and their families were required to read a book over the summer break. The book chosen by most was *Farewell to Manzanar*, which is about the bombing of Pearl Harbor. The students then completed activities throughout the following school year related to the book they read. The school librarian, Kim Moebius said that overall the program was a bit difficult at times, but that the positives outweighed the negatives. She also stated that the students enjoyed learning about history through the reading program and that the school would check the program’s progress by the end of the year (Bafile).

Some communities and schools may be reluctant to start the reading programs because they take a lot of hard work, but the results usually seem to be worth the time and effort. All that is needed to start a literacy program is to organize a committee comprised of library staff and community members. Organizations can also be included in the process by partnering with the committee to create their campaign. Teachers are also a part of these types of programs because they can teach the book to the group of people. Making a planned schedule for the group is also necessary so that event times and dates are properly organized (Masterpiece Theatre). Making a community reading program only takes a few simple steps that can lead to an enjoyable way to read and discuss many different books.

Even though the rates of people reading are declining, community reading programs may be able to do their part in changing that. The Fairview Community could definitely benefit from this type of program because it gathers people of all ages together and provides insight from those different age groups. Although there are some minor setbacks, such as difficulty organizing the event, the benefits outweigh those challenges.